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Science Fiction: Literature for our Times

By Sheila Schwartz

Science-fiction is coming into its own in the cosmology of this society. Over 2,000 aficionados attended the recent World Science-Fiction Conference in Boston. *The Wall Street Journal* has recognized its new and increasing popularity with a recent article entitled: "Zam. Science Fiction Zaps Its Giant Robots, Stresses 'Relevance,' " in which we are informed that last year publishers released 175 new science fiction novels—triple the number released in 1965.

The MLA has its own scholarly journal devoted to the genre. Called *Extrapolation*, this journal also serves as the publication of a new organization, the Science Fiction Research Association, Inc.[1]

Why has this literary step-child sprung suddenly into prominence and respectability? Why is this the only literary genre capable of attracting so large a crowd as it did in Boston, and why are so many of its adherents young people?

The present relevance of science-fiction is based on three aspects which contribute to making it a genre which is different from mainstream literature. These three features are the following: it deals with a greater reality than mainstream literature; it uses new and different conventions; and it has an interdisciplinary focus which makes it difficult to understand without some knowledge of other facets of the contemporary world.

The first notable feature of contemporary science-fiction is its *concern with a greater and more pressing reality* than that encompassed by the psyche of one individual. "Increasingly, it focuses on problems that worry people today, often projected into the future and carried to their logical extremes. Such as, what happens to New York when the population hits 50 million? Or how does a planet survive when it has so depleted its resources that it is practically

out of water?"[2]

The focus of science-fiction is with the space *outside* of the individual and with occurrences in that outer space such as overpopulation, pollution, famine, thought control, war with other species, space colonization, and atomic holocaust. There is no place in science-fiction for the kind of philosophy that sees reality as determined by individual perception. Individual perception has nothing to do with reality. Pollution does not exist through the eyes of the individual; the individual must be viewed in the midst of pollution. To illustrate, Rachel Carson could not have written *The Sea Around Us* from the point of view of an individual fish. No, she wrote about the sea, about the total entity, and about how individual fish and groups of fish were affected by that entity. This is the kind of perspective shared by most science-fiction writers. We remember the plot of Michael Cricton's *The Andromeda Strain* but not the characters.

Arthur C. Clarke, in an interview about his film *Space Odyssey:* 2001, stated that in his opinion science-fiction is the *only* literature which is concerned with "reality." Most fiction, he points out, is concerned only with little bits of reality which happen to only one small species on one small planet. To Clarke, science-fiction embraces a broader reality, the reality of the entire cosmos.[3]

Judith Merril, noted science-fiction writer and anthologist, explains the greater reality in the following way:

> Art at any time can achieve validity only if it is rooted in the accumulated human experience of its day, and touches somewhere on the nerve center of the culture from which it springs. The literature of the mid-20th century can be meaningful only in so far as it perceives, and relates itself to, the central reality of our culture: the revolution in scientific thought which has replaced mechanics with dynamics, classification with integration, positivism with relativity, certainties with statistical probabilities, dualism with parity.[4]

One of the best science-fiction writers who illustrates this concern with a greater reality is Olaf Stapeldon, an Englishman who died in 1951. His first novel, *Last and First Men*, appeared in 1930 and his last, *A Man Divided*, in 1950. In his works, "the drama is not the great drama of human fate. The tragic sense of life is expressed not in the death of an individual, but in the destruction or superseding of an entire race, and what is lost is not so much life, as a whole mode of life."[5]

Stapeldon's greatest work is *Last and First Men*. Although it was written in 1930, it is so meaningful for the present time that WBAI-FM, the avant-garde Pacifica station in New York City, presents a reading of the entire book once a year.

Stapeldon, like many other science-fiction writers was more concerned about the future than about the period in which he was working. He explained this in the Foreword to the American edition in the following way:

> Man seems to be entering one of the major crises of his career. His whole future, nay the possibility of his having any future at all, depends on the turn events may take in the next half-century. It is a commonplace that he is coming into possession of new and dangerous instruments for controlling his environment and his own nature. Perhaps it is less obvious that he is also groping toward a new view of his office in the scheme of things, and toward a new and racial purpose. Unfortunately, he may possibly take too long to learn what it is that he really wants to do with himself. Before he can gain clear insight, he may lose himself in a vast desert of spiritual aridity, or even blunder into physical self-destruction. Nothing can save him but a new vision and a consequent new order of sanity or common sense.

In dealing with a greater reality than that of the individual, Stapeldon has set himself the task of writing a mythology of contemporary man as seen by men living in the distant future, that is, of writing the history of the human race. The time span with which he deals can be noted on the scale below.[6]

2,000 years ago ———	JESUS CHRIST	
1,500 ———————	A. D. 500 Charlemagne	
1,000 ———————	A. D. 1000 Norman Conquest 1066	
500 ———————	America Discovered 1492 A. D. 1500 Newton	
TODAY —————— 2,000 A. D.	European War 1914 Anglo-French War Russo-German War Euro-American War Sino-American War First World State Founded	
500 ———————	A. D. 2500	AMERICANIZED WORLD
1,000———————	A. D. 3000	
1,500 ———————	A. D. 3500	
2,000 years hence———	A. D. 4000	

It is interesting to note that even in 1930 Stapeldon thought that the ultimate conflict which would bring about the destruction of Europe would be between America, as the Western epitome and China as the Asiatic or Eastern one. The destruction would be achieved through the use of bacteriological and atomic weapons.

The book opens with a description of this present epoch in history as it appears to the Last Men. The device through which it is achieved is that the Last Men are communicating through time with the First Men, as a warning: One writes:

> Observe now your own epoch of history as it appears to the Last Men. . . . The first and some would say the greatest achievement of your own "Western" culture was the conceiving of two ideals of conduct, both essential to the spirit's well-being. Socrates, delighting in the truth for its own sake and not merely for practical ends, glorified in unbiased thinking, honesty of mind and speech. Jesus, delighting in the actual human persons around him, and in that flavour of divinity which, for him pervaded the world stood for unselfish love of neighbours, and of God. Socrates woke to the ideal of dispassionate intelligence. Jesus to the ideal of passionate yet self-oblivious worship. Socrates urged intellectual integrity, Jesus integrity of will. Each, of course, though starting with a different emphasis, involved the other.
>
> Unfortunately both of these ideals demanded of the human brain a degree of vitality and coherence of which the nervous system of the First Men was never really capable. For many centuries these twin stars enticed the more precociously human of human animals, in vain. And the failure to put these ideals in practice helped to engender in the race a cynical lassitude which was one cause of its decay.
>
> There were also other causes. The peoples from whom sprang Socrates and Jesus were also among the first to conceive admiration for Fate. In Greek tragic art and Hebrew worship of divine law as also in the Indian resignation, man experienced at first very obscurely, that vision of an alien and supernal beauty, which was to exalt and perplex him again and again throughout his whole career. The conflict between this worship and the intransigent loyalty to Life embattled against Death, proved insoluble. And though few individuals were ever clearly conscious of the issue, the first human species was again and again unwittingly hampered in its spiritual development by this supreme perplexity.

I have included the above three paragraphs as the best possible illustration of the scope of science-fiction at its best.

In dealing with this *greater reality*, science-fiction employs artifacts and *conventions* never before used as the subject of literature. This is clearly evident

in the selection quoted above.

Of course, this is not the only artistic area which is doing this. Plastic is an artistic medium which did not exist before the present era and devices such as the simultaneous sound tracks in the film *M*A*S*H* are examples of new conventions in sound.

Science-fiction employs conventions which are appropriate to no other genre and are as different in the context of science-fiction as is space exploration in relation to exploration of the past. In science-fiction, ideas which were once fantasies become realistic conventions. When Rip van Winkle slept for twenty years that was an individual fantasy and experience. In Robert Heinlein's *Door Into Summer* and Anders Bodelsen's Danish novel, *Freezing Down*, cryogenics has become a reality and the question is not the individual man but the effects on society as a whole. Hibernation becomes not an accidental but a planned aspect of life and death and that completely changes this convention.

Robots are a convention which did not exist before the coining of the word in Karel Capek's play, *R. U. R.*, and the relationship between humans and robots is a completely different thing from relationships found in traditional literature. In Clifford Simak's novel, *City* and in Jack Williamson's short story "With Folded Hands," robots provide the infallible super-service which makes human beings weak and dependent. The Joseph Losey film, *The Servant*, showed us a wealthy young man who was destroyed by overdependency on a servant, but this is a malevolent and individual situation which makes it far different from a science-fiction story in which masses of people become dependent on machines which do their work as mechanically and unemotionally as steamrollers. When a situation is based on individual neurosis it can be changed. The convention is far different in science-fiction when emotion and individuality are deleted and all that remains are human beings in the position of having opened Pandora's box.

Another new convention is the one that deals with the development of intelligence in other species. In the *Bible*, Jonah's whale was the instrument of God rather than an intelligent and self-actualized mammal. It is only in recent science-fiction that the convention of talking fish is introduced as a serious matter. Two of the best works which deal with communication with dolphins are Robert Merle's superb novel, *The Day of the Dolphin* (Fawcett Crest) and Leo Szilard's short story, "The Voice of the Dolphins" (Simon and Schuster).

Some of these conventions appeared first in the work of Olaf Stapeldon. Among these are: "the mutant who is both a prodigy and a monster; the dogs whose intelligence is equal to the man's; the ruin of the world by an atomic chain-reaction; the superman who is not the oppressor of *Homo sapiens* but his potential savior and actual victim; alien intelligences which are not even animal; controlled evolution and artificial brains. . . ."[7]

Examples of these conventions can be found in the following works: the intelligent dogs in Clifford Simak's *City* (Ace); the ruin of the world by atomic chain-reaction in Nevil Shute's *On The Beach* (Signet); Mordecai Roshwald's *Level 7* (Signet); Pierre Boulle's *Planet of the Apes* (Signet); and Pat Frank's *Alas Babylon* (Bantam). The superman who is the savior of mankind can be found in Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and A. E. Van Vogt's

Slan (Ace). Alien intelligence can be found in many works such as Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* (Signet), and in John Wyndham's novels *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos.*

In another new book, *The Edict*, unfamiliar conventions include the outlawing of babies because of overpopulation; a daily calorie quotation (CQ) based on the current population figures; artificial robot babies and the use of narcosynthesis to induce women to prefer them to real babies; and State Museums which contain real flowers and dogs and cats which have become so rare that they must be kept in museums.[8]

Fear of the intelligent machine is another science-fiction convention. We saw it in Arthur C. Clarke's film *Space Odyssey: 2001* and have a good example of it in both the film and in the novel *Colossus (The Forbin Project)* (Berkley Medallion); in the film *THX 1138*; and in Ira Levin's novel, *This Perfect Day* (Bantam).

It is the use of these conventions which give science-fiction its *interdisciplinary focus* and make it difficult to understand apart from some understanding of the contemporary world. This is both harmful and valuable to the genre. On one hand, science-fiction's close link to the total cosmology of our society tends to date it and make it obsolete when the convention is no longer innovative or controversial. Those who saw the showing of Robert Heinlein's film *Destination Moon* on national television during the recent moonwalk realized that it was so out of date and so naive in relation to the real moonwalk that there was little value in viewing it. There was nothing to be learned from it aside from the fact that in 1950 Heinlein had been able to prophecy with much accuracy what would happen in our space program.

But this interdisciplinary focus is of great value in giving science-fiction its relevance and in helping to immerse the reader in a world far greater than that encompassed within the fictional work. Much of science-fiction undoubtedly will not last, but while it is relevant it catches and illuminates the present.

Let us look at three recent works to see the kind of interdisciplinary orientation needed for comprehension. The first, *This Perfect Day* by Ira Levin (Fawcett Paperback). This book, about the future world, incorporates politics, philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology, and language, for a stimulating perspective and prophetic warning about the present and future. In this world, there is no sickness, fighting, poverty, bad odors, rebellion, no class struggle and no real humanity. The price for these achievements has been freedom and individuality.

Individuality is repressed by giving people numbers which they keep from birth to death (do social security numbers already play this role?), by keeping them tranquilized with compulsory weekly injections of drugs, and by using UniComp, the infallible computer to determine each citizen's roles from birth to death.

The theological aspects of this book are an extension of both our contemporary attitudes toward God and toward the computer. The computer has become God, reflecting in the novel the classic computer joke in which a scientist feeds the question, "Is there a God" to a computer and the computer replies,

"There is, *now*."

Psychology has changed in this future world from individual analysis to mass chemotherapy. All people are drugged from birth to death to keep them pliable and docile. For greater understanding of this the reader should be aware of contemporary news items which report that soldiers in Vietnam find that they can survive only on drugs; a recent "hero" said he could never have performed his acts of heroism had he not been "high." We also read about school children being drugged to make them manageable in school. The drugs in *This Perfect Day* prevent all emotional extremes and bring about a completely manageable populace.

The philosophical conflicts in this novel are as old as civilization but have a different emphasis because of the scientific factor as the orienting point. What would it be like to have a Utopia? Here we see the results of a scientific one and it is far less beneficent than Skinner's Utopia in *Walden II*. Is it worth giving up personal and creative freedom for social welfare? Which is more important to the human being, freedom or security?

The language elements of this book are used, as in Orwell's *1984* as tools for political and social power. To understand the language of these two books the reader must be aware of advertising, mass media, communication, and manipulation, rather than of traditional literary imagery. As part of the manipulative aspects of language the new curse words are "hate," "brother-fighting," "you fighting well better had," and "fight Uni." The words of the national anthem are:

> One mighty Family,
> A single perfect breed,
> Free of all selfishness
> Aggressiveness and greed;
> Each member giv-ing all he has to give
> And get-ting all he needs to live!
> One mighty Family,
> A single noble race,
> Sending its sons and daughters
> Bravely into space. . . . (p. 97)

Another recent science-fiction work with an interdisciplinary focus is Robert Silverberg's *Tower of Glass* (Bantam). The mythical base of this book is the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. In the contemporary version a tower of glass is being built to try to establish contact with the source of all matter and intelligence. The world in which this tower is being built has been established by the author as a commentary on racism and vanity in today's society. In this world of the future the racism is toward the androids, men who look just like ordinary men but who were born in vats instead. For a complete appreciation of this book the reader must understand both racism and the biblical base.

The third book is Ralph Blum's *The Simultaneous Man* (Bantam). In Blum's world, science has achieved the ability to delete through chemotherapy

the negative impulses in people and to replace them with behavior patterns which are more constructive to the individual and to society. Greater understanding of this book will result from exposure to the following two newspaper articles:

The first article is from *The New York Times* of November 9, 1971, and deals with psychotechnology (the practical or technological use of psychology as in analysis of social or industrial problems). Written by Kenneth B. Clark, president of the American Psychological Association, it makes the following suggestions:

> It is an awesome fact that a few men in the leadership positions in the industrialized nations of the world now have the power to determine among themselves the survival or extinction of human civilization. . . . Given these contemporary facts, it would seem logical that a requirement imposed upon all power-controlling leaders and those who aspire to such leadership would be that they accept and use the earliest perfected form of psychotechnological, biochemical intervention which would assure their positive use of power and reduce or block the possibility of their using power destructively. This form of psychotechnological medication would be a type of internally imposed disarmament. . . .[9]

The second article also deals with the scientific awareness and knowledge needed by the reader of this novel. In *The Simultaneous Man*, "Operation Remake" is accomplished through the use of hypnosis, electrode implantation, chemotherapy and computerized medicine. *The New York Times* of September 15, 1970, in an article about the work of Dr. Jose M. B. Delgado of the Yale School of Medicine, reported the following:

> Direct two-way radio communication between an animal's brain and a computer has been established for the first time by a team of scientists at Yale University. It was used to enable the brain to control artificially one of its own functions.
>
> In an experiment, electrodes implanted in a chimpanzee's brain picked up electrical brain waves which were then transmitted to a computer by a small receiver-transmitter atop the animal's head.
>
> The computer, programmed to recognize special characteristics of the wave, returned a control signal to another part of the brain through the receiver.
>
> Stimulated by the control signal, the latter part of the brain internally turned off the brain activity originally sensed by the computer.
> While the exchange is of the most rudimentary sort, the feat is said by the Yale team to suggest promising new ways of

> treating mental and physical disorders in human beings. Moreover, it raises the prospect of establishing direct electronic communication from one brain to another. . . . Ultimately, we may have internal brain pacemakers, controlling such things as breathing, motor functions and emotions, by a similar system. . . . All of this prompted talk of 'push-button people' and of dictators controlling the brains of whole armies. . . .

We have been examining here some of the characteristics peculiar to science-fiction which contribute to its relevance. We have noted the shift from the problems of the inner man to concern with the problems outside of man from which man can not escape and in the face of which he loses his individuality. In dealing with the greater reality, science-fiction writers have employed conventions which are particularly appropriate to science-fiction and which can fit into no other genre. Lastly, we have noted that the study and understanding of science-fiction requires different kinds of understanding from that required by traditional mainstream literature. Instead of going into a work for understanding as the New Critics would have us do, we must go into society for the knowledge necessary to understand science-fiction. And this knowledge is interdisciplinary, contemporary, and possibly transitory. But transitory or not, science-fiction is what holds and interests young people today and an understanding of the genre and of how it achieves its effects will enable us to enjoy and appreciate it along with our students. *The Space Child's Mother Goose*, which can be more readily understood by students than by teachers, shows us the direction in which we must move in its contemporary science-fiction versions of Mother Goose rhymes:

> The Hydrogen Dog and the Cobalt Cat
> Side by side in the Armory sat.
> Nobody thought about fusion or fission,
> Everyone spoke of their peacetime mission,
> Till somebody came and opened the door.
> There they were, in a neutron fog.
> The Codrogen Cat and the Hybalt Dog;
> They mushroomed up with a terrible roar—
> And Nobody Never was there—nomore.[10]

NOTES

[1]Science Fiction Research Association, Inc.; Chairman, Thomas D. Clareson, Box 3186, The College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio 44691.

[2]*Wall Street Journal.*

[3]*2001 . . . And Even Beyond.* Poul Anderson and Arthur C. Clarke discuss "2001 . . . A Space Odyssey." Recorded in May, 1968. Pacifica Tape Library, 2217 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, California.

[4]Judith Merril, "What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?, in *SF: The Other Side of Realism*, ed. Thomas D. Clareson (Bowling Green Ohio: Bowling

Green University Popular Press, 1971) p. 54.

[5]Basil Davenport, "The Vision of Olaf Stapeldon," in *To the End of Time* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1953) p. vii.

[6]Olaf Stapeldon, *Last and First Men* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1953) p. 29.

[7]Davenport, p. vii.

[8]Max Ehrlich, *The Edict* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

[9]Kenneth B. Clark, "Leadership and Psychotechnology," *The New York Times*, November 9, 1971, p. 47C.

[10]Frederick Winsor, *The Space Child's Mother Goose* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958) p. 35.

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